

What California Teachers Say About Their Instructional Materials For English Learner Students: New Data and Insights

Elizabeth Burr and Ryan W. Lewis, WestEd

Part of a continuing series for California education leaders on key policy issues related to teachers and teaching, this knowledge brief summarizes California findings from a nationwide survey on teachers' perceptions of their instructional materials for English learner students. It includes considerations for improvements in instructional materials and professional learning.

There are 1.1 million English learner (EL) students in California, representing 18 percent of the state-wide student population (California Department of Education [CDE], 2021b). Results from the Smarter Balanced tests administered in spring 2021 showed that 11 percent of EL students in California met or exceeded standards on the English language arts (ELA) test, compared with 54 percent of never-EL students, and that 8 percent of EL students met or exceeded standards on the math test, compared with 38 percent of never-EL students (CDE, 2022).¹ Additionally, estimates suggest that EL students in California lost nearly four months of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fensterwald & Willis, 2022).

Given these disparities, it is vital that leaders who are developing policies and professional learning systems and adopting materials lists understand teachers' perceptions of the suitability of their instructional materials for EL students. Across subject areas, California teachers have varying proportions of EL students in their classrooms, and these differing contexts influence their perceptions. Knowing more about these differences in perceptions can help leaders to better tailor professional learning opportunities, including strategies and supports that help teachers use subject-matter materials to accelerate the learning of their EL students.

English learner students have been severely impacted by unequal access to quality content and resources [due to the COVID-19 pandemic]. Education leaders can take advantage of timely opportunities to accelerate learning for these students.

Following some background on California's standards-aligned instructional materials and on the state's EL student population, this brief summarizes California findings from a nationwide survey on teachers' perceptions of their instructional materials for EL students. The brief highlights teachers' views on the adequacy of their instructional materials for their EL students, how they address any inadequacies, whether the materials help them to provide culturally relevant instruction, and what value they place on particular elements of the materials. Finally, the discussion section of the brief includes implications for improving materials and for strengthening professional learning.

¹ Due to factors surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, testing participation in 2020–21 varied, so care should be used when interpreting results. Still, any evidence is important to consider at this moment.

California's content standards, curriculum frameworks, and instructional materials lists

Over the past decade, in efforts to support teachers in better preparing students for postsecondary success, California has adopted new subject-specific K–12 academic standards and rolled out related curriculum frameworks and lists of approved instructional materials. Timelines for ELA, math, and science have differed (Burr et al., 2020). For example, in 2014, California introduced a groundbreaking curriculum framework that, for the first time, integrated ELA and English-language development (ELD); the related instructional materials list followed in late 2015. California's ELA/ELD framework explicitly emphasizes culturally responsive teaching, access, and equity for all students, and the use of an assets-based approach to providing a robust and comprehensive instructional program for EL students (CDE, 2014; Yopp et al., 2016).

In contrast, California's initial math framework, adopted prior to the ELA/ELD framework, does not mention EL students or culturally relevant instruction (CDE, 2013). The science curriculum framework, although it was released after the ELA/ELD framework, offers little explicit guidance for teaching EL students; instead, it encourages all teachers to consult the ELD standards in order to fully include EL students in science instruction (CDE, 2016b). While math and science teachers can consult the ELA/ELD framework for guidance in their respective content areas, their math and science materials lists, which are aligned with the frameworks, do not include the same degree of focus on EL students as the ELA/ELD materials list.

The math framework is currently being revised, and the revision is intended to reflect the most up-to-date theory and practices related to EL students (CDE, 2021a). It will provide guidance for implementing culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy that supports the instructional needs of each student. It will also include new strategies that have been described in more recent EL-related policy initiatives undertaken by CDE.² The revised math framework is expected to be adopted in July 2022, with an associated instructional materials list to follow in 2023.

California's English learner students

California's EL students live in every part of the state, but are more concentrated in some counties than in others (see Table 1 and Figure 1). According to the most recent data available, the vast majority of California's EL students (781,416 of 1.1 million) live in counties where the percentage of EL students hovers around the state average of 18 percent (16–23 percent). However, a sizable number of EL students live in counties where the percentages of EL students are lower (156,036 students in counties with 2–15 percent of EL students). There are 124,768 EL students who live in counties where EL students make up 24–37 percent of the overall student population. (These categories, and the counties included in them, are listed in Table 1 and shown in Figure 1.) It is important to note that teachers with low concentrations of EL students in their classrooms are not always located in counties with fewer EL students. Similarly, teachers with high proportions of EL students in their classrooms are not necessarily located in counties with larger numbers of EL students.

² For example, the state's *English Learner Roadmap* (CDE, 2017) and *Educating for Global Competency: Findings and Recommendations from the 2016 California Global Education Summit* (CDE, 2016a).

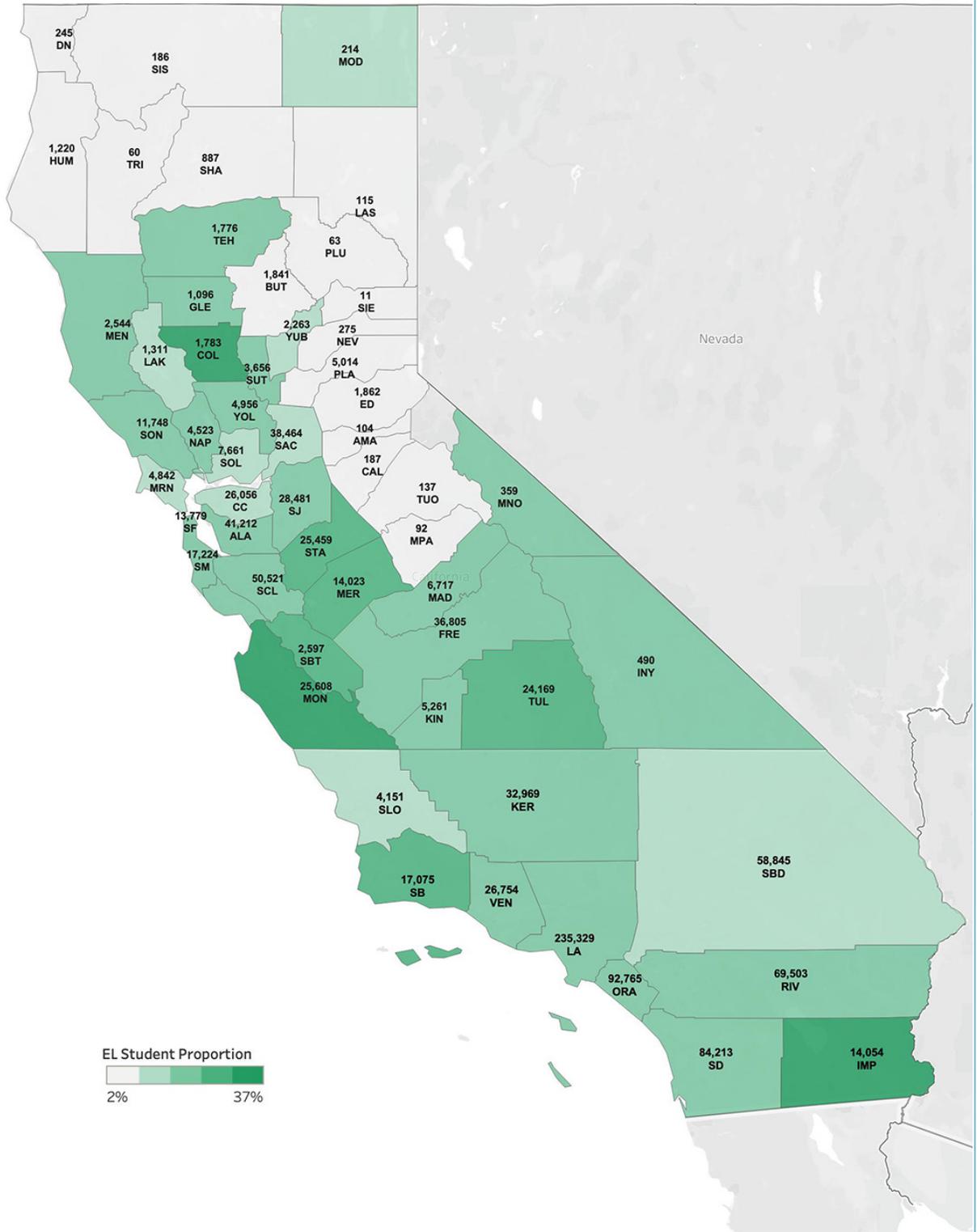
Table 1. Percentages and numbers of EL students in California counties*

Color Category	Counties Included in Category	EL Student Percentage Range	Number of EL Students in Category
1	Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Del Norte, El Dorado, Humboldt, Lassen, Mariposa, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Trinity, Tuolumne	2%–8%	12,229
2	Contra Costa, Lake, Marin, Modoc, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Luis Obispo, Solano, Yuba	9%–15%	143,807
3	Alameda, Fresno, Glenn, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Los Angeles, Madera, Mendocino, Mono, Napa, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Sonoma, Sutter, Tehama, Ventura, Yolo	16%–23%	781,416
4	Merced, San Benito, Santa Barbara, Stanislaus, Tulare	24%–30%	83,323
5	Colusa, Imperial, Monterey	31%–37%	41,445

* The categories of percentages in Table 1 are different than those used in the following survey data analyses because, within counties, teachers can have widely varying proportions of EL students in their classrooms. For example, it is possible that the same county may include both teachers within the “many-EL” category used in the following survey data analyses and teachers within the “few-EL” category.

Source: CDE 2019–20 data.

Figure 1. Numbers of EL students in California counties



Source: CDE 2019-20 data.

Survey findings

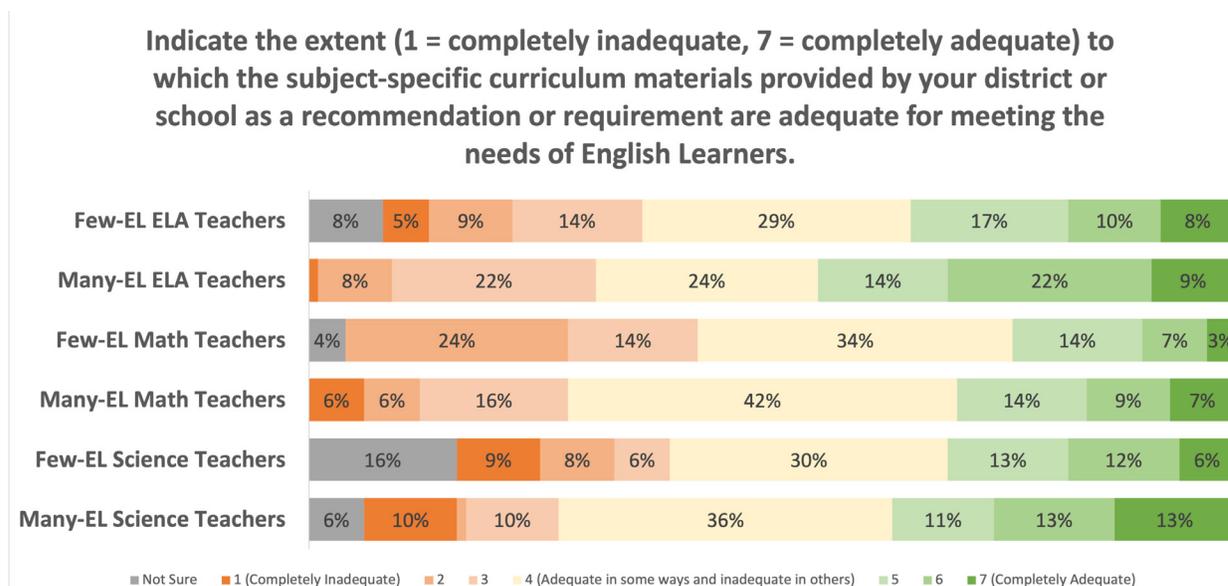
This brief presents California findings from a nationwide survey of K–12 teachers, conducted in spring 2021 as part of the American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS), a project of the RAND Corporation’s American Teacher Panel (ATP).³ In addition to asking questions on a variety of education topics, the survey asked K–12 teachers to report on their district- or school-provided instructional materials with regard to the EL students⁴ in their classrooms. The authors of this brief analyzed the responses of California ELA, math, and science teachers (evenly distributed across elementary, middle, and high school settings) with low concentrations of EL students in their classrooms and with high concentrations of EL students in their classrooms.⁵ In this brief, “few-EL” teachers are defined as teachers with low concentrations of EL students (0 to 10 percent) and “many-EL” teachers are defined as those with high concentrations of EL students (25 percent or more).⁶

This section describes five key findings that emerged from the survey responses.

- 3 The ATP surveys were originally launched in 2014 and are administered several times a year in more than 20 states, with educators in California, Florida, New York, and Texas oversampled to afford state-level representativeness. Educators who change schools remain on the panel, and new members are added periodically so that the panel remains representative over time. For the spring 2021 AIRS administration discussed in this brief, more than 400 California teachers responded to the survey, and the margins of error for the results presented in this brief are question-specific but generally range from 5 to 10 percentage points.
- 4 The authors of this brief acknowledge that CDE now uses the term “multilingual learners” instead of “English learner students.” However, the term “English learner” (EL) is intentionally used in this brief because that is the term used in the RAND surveys. The authors also acknowledge that the EL student population is both diverse and fluid—individual EL students vary by language, proficiency level, culture, prior education experience, length of time classified as an EL student, and time in the U.S.—and that the EL student population is constantly changing as students reclassify as proficient in English.
- 5 In the ATP, teachers who taught more than one subject, including many who are K–6 teachers, were randomly assigned to one subject, and all questions referred to that subject only. Throughout this brief, the authors use “ELA teachers,” “math teachers,” and “science teachers” to refer to the teachers who were assigned to that subject.
- 6 Of the more than 400 California teacher survey respondents, about 170 are categorized as few-EL teachers and about 140 are categorized as many-EL teachers. This includes responses from up to 70 few-EL ELA teachers, 60 many-EL ELA teachers, 60 few-EL math teachers, 40 many-EL math teachers, 40 few-EL science teachers, and 40 many-EL science teachers per question.

1. The majority of California teachers, across subject areas and EL contexts, did not believe that their materials are adequate for meeting their EL students' needs and did not believe that their materials are adequate for helping them to provide culturally relevant instruction. Responses differed by subject matter and concentration of EL students.

Figure 2. California teachers differed, by subject taught and percentage of EL students in their classroom, in their views about the adequacy of their instructional materials to meet the needs of EL students



As shown in Figure 2, when asked about the extent to which their subject-specific materials are adequate for meeting the needs of their EL students, fewer than half of teachers, across all subject areas and EL contexts, indicated that their instructional materials are usually or completely adequate for meeting the needs of their EL students and providing guidance on culturally relevant instruction.⁷ While there were differences across subject areas, ELA, math, and science teachers with low concentrations of EL students were less likely than those with high concentrations of EL students to indicate that their materials are adequate.

In ELA, 35 percent of few-EL teachers and 45 percent of many-EL teachers reported that their materials are usually or completely adequate for meeting the needs of their EL students. Math and science teachers were more negative: 24 and 31 percent of few-EL teachers, respectively, said their materials are usually or completely adequate, and 30 and 37 percent of many-EL teachers, respectively, responded the same way.

Conversely, 28 percent of few-EL ELA teachers and 30 percent of many-EL ELA teachers reported that their materials are usually or completely *inadequate* for meeting the needs of their EL students.

⁷ Respondents were asked to respond on a 7-point scale, from 1 (completely inadequate) to 7 (completely adequate), with 4 meaning “sometimes inadequate and sometimes adequate.” On the survey instrument, ratings of 2, 3, 5, and 6 were not individually labeled, as depicted in the legend for Figures 2 and 3. For summary purposes, teachers were considered to be responding “usually to completely inadequate” (shaded in orange) if they marked 1, 2, or 3, and were considered to be responding “usually to completely adequate” (shaded in green) if they marked 5, 6, or 7.

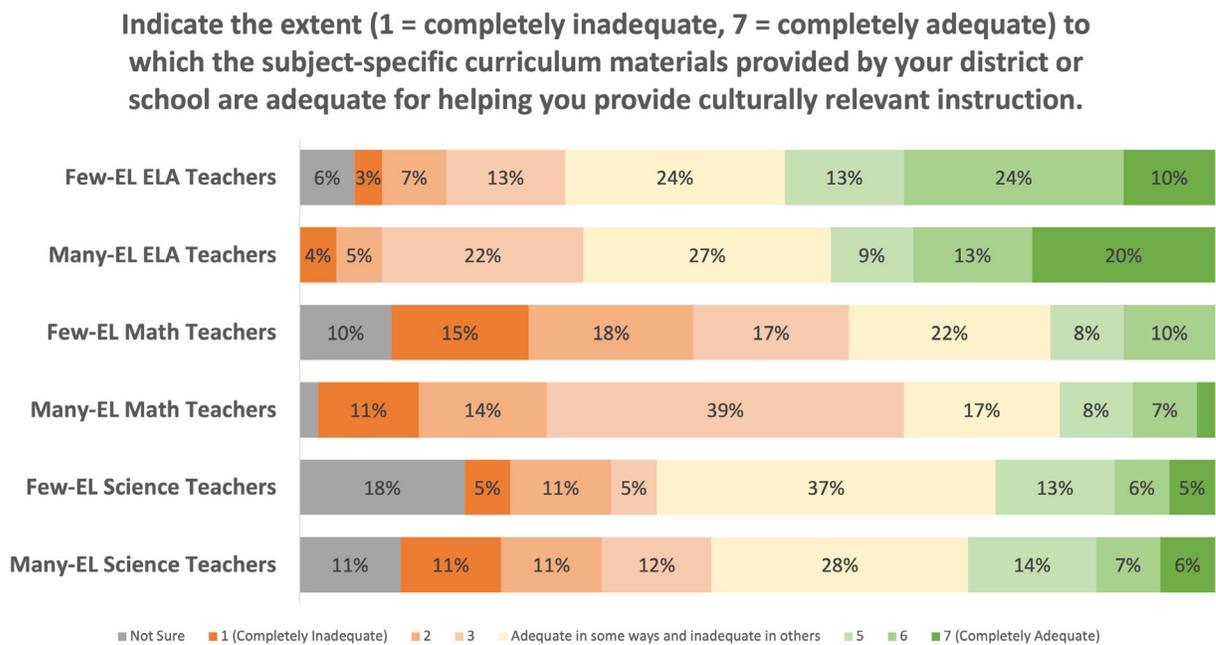
Teachers’ understanding of pedagogy to instruct EL students may influence their responses to these survey items. For example, some teachers may expect the materials to explain exactly what to do, and these teachers may or may not have sufficient training and skills to effectively teach EL students and to use their materials to support that instruction.

Findings on the extent to which the materials help teachers provide culturally relevant instruction suggest that the materials fall short. In this regard, ELA teachers were the most positive. As shown in Figure 3, a greater share of few-EL teachers (47 percent) than many-EL ELA teachers (42 percent) indicated that their instructional materials are at least usually adequate for helping them provide culturally relevant instruction. Twenty percent of many-EL ELA teachers chose the most positive response: completely adequate. Lower proportions of math and science teachers responded the same way.

Conversely, 50 percent of few-EL math teachers and 64 percent of many-EL math teachers indicated that their materials are usually or completely *inadequate* for providing culturally relevant instruction.

Given that most teachers in California have EL students in their classrooms, it is worth considering why larger shares of few-EL science and math teachers, compared with all other teacher categories, felt unsure about how to answer these two survey items (as indicated by percentages of teachers who selected the “not sure” response option). Additionally, within each discipline, few-EL teachers were more likely than many-EL teachers to be unsure about how to answer these survey items, especially with regard to the degree to which their materials help them to provide culturally relevant instruction (Figure 3).

Figure 3. California teachers differed, by subject taught and percentage of EL students in their classroom, in their views about the adequacy of their instructional materials to help provide culturally relevant instruction

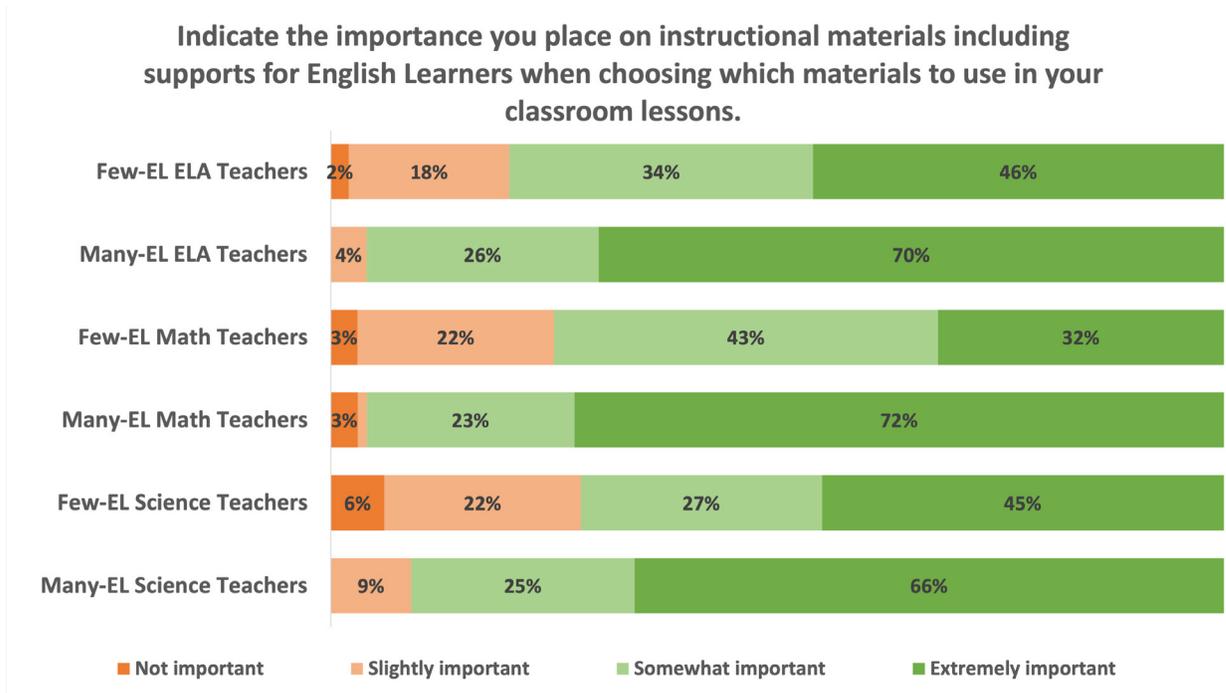


2. A significant minority of few-EL teachers placed low importance on the inclusion of supports for EL students when choosing materials for their lessons.

Teachers were asked about the importance they place on various characteristics of materials, including whether the materials include supports for EL students, when choosing which materials to use in their classroom lessons.

As shown in Figure 4, few-EL teachers were far less likely than many-EL teachers to indicate that it is extremely important that the materials they choose to use in their classroom lessons include these supports. This was true across subject areas, but the gap between few-EL teachers and many-EL teachers was particularly wide in math.

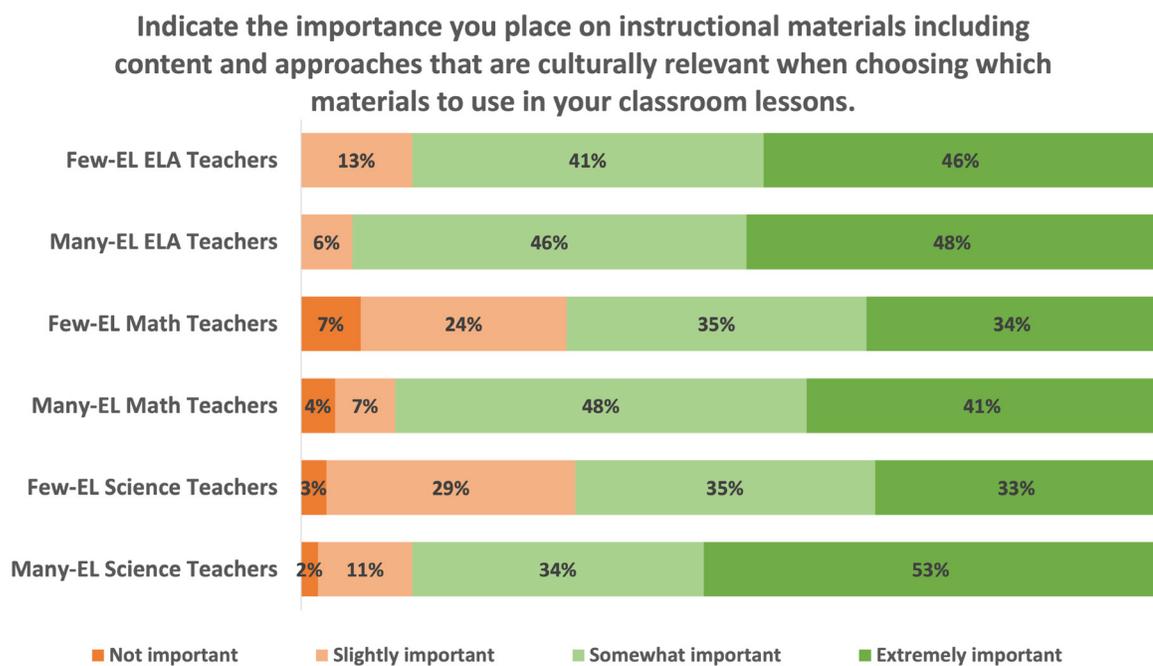
Figure 4. California teachers differed, by subject taught and percentage of EL students in their classroom, in their views about the importance of supports for their EL students in the materials they choose to use in their classroom lessons



3. Fewer than half of few-EL science teachers and of all ELA and math teachers believed that it is extremely important that materials include culturally relevant content and approaches.

Teachers were asked about the importance they place on instructional materials including culturally relevant content and approaches. As shown in Figure 5, fewer than half of both few-EL and many-EL ELA teachers (46 percent and 48 percent, respectively) responded that selecting materials with culturally relevant content and approaches is extremely important. The same was true for few-EL math teachers, many-EL math teachers, and few-EL science teachers (34 percent, 41 percent, and 33 percent, respectively). Just over half of many-EL science teachers (53 percent) chose this most positive option.

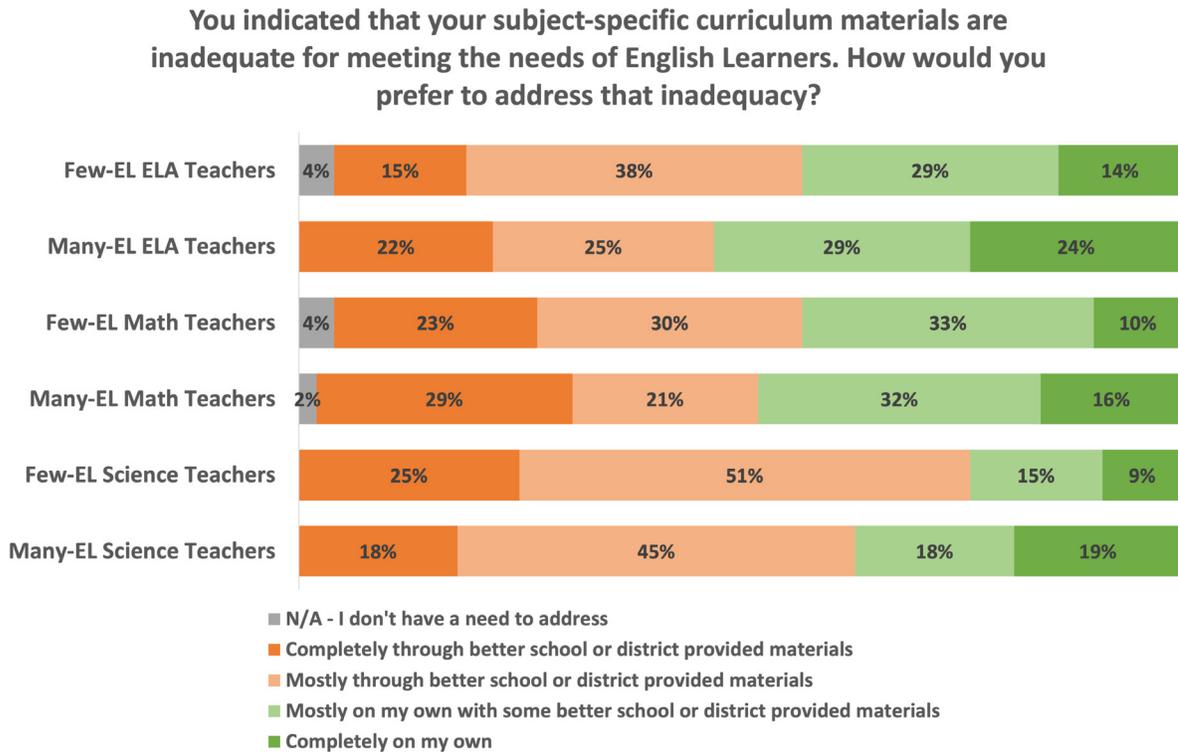
Figure 5. California teachers differed, by subject taught and percentage of EL students in their classroom, in their views about the importance of culturally relevant content and approaches when choosing materials for classroom lessons



4. More than half of many-EL ELA teachers preferred autonomy to remedy the inadequacy of their materials in meeting the needs of their EL students.

Teachers who reported that their materials are inadequate for meeting the needs of EL students were asked how they prefer to remedy that inadequacy. As shown in Figure 6, in general, teachers of all subjects (particularly science teachers) and EL contexts reported a preference for addressing that inadequacy through better school- or district-provided materials. The only exception was many-EL ELA teachers, 53 percent of whom indicated that they prefer to create, find, or modify materials mostly or completely on their own. Additionally, across all subjects, many-EL teachers were more likely to prefer autonomy to remedy materials themselves than few-EL teachers.

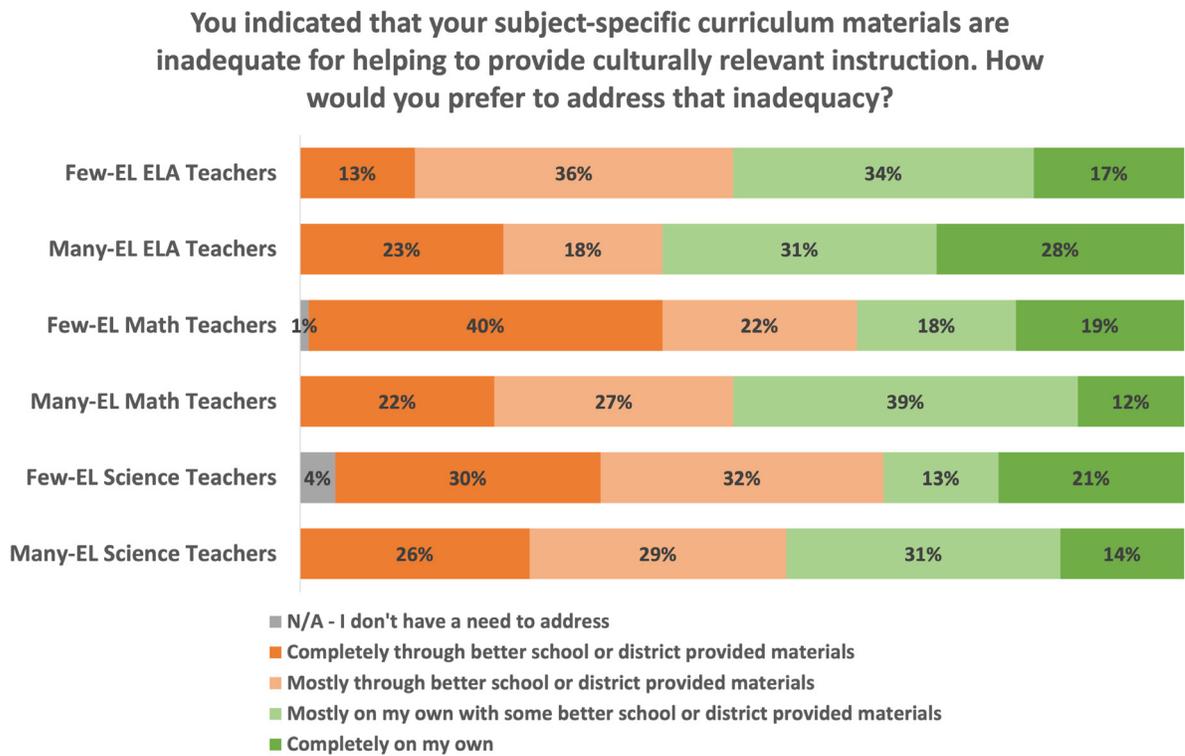
Figure 6. California teachers who viewed their materials as inadequate for meeting the needs of their EL students differed, by subject taught and percentage of EL students in their classroom, in their views about how to remedy that inadequacy



5. In all subjects, California teachers with high concentrations of EL students were more likely to prefer to remedy the inadequacy of their materials in helping them to provide culturally relevant instruction on their own (as opposed to through district- or school-provided materials).

California teachers who reported that their materials are inadequate⁸ in helping them provide culturally relevant instruction were asked how they prefer to remedy that inadequacy. As shown in Figure 7, across subjects, teachers with high concentrations of EL students were more likely than teachers with low concentrations of EL students to prefer to address the inadequacy by creating, finding, or modifying materials mostly or completely on their own. Math and science teachers, however, were more likely than ELA teachers to prefer that the school or district provide materials to address the inadequacy of their materials, rather than augmenting the materials themselves, to help them to provide culturally relevant instruction.

Figure 7. California teachers who viewed their materials as inadequate for helping them provide culturally relevant instruction differed, by subject taught and percentage of EL students in their classroom, in their views about how to remedy that inadequacy



⁸ This category includes responses from up to 70 few-EL ELA teachers, 60 many-EL ELA teachers, 60 few-EL math teachers, 40 many-EL math teachers, 40 few-EL science teachers, and 40 many-EL science teachers—the vast majority of the eligible sample.

Discussion

Teachers benefit from support to gain skills, learn effective instructional strategies, and use standards-aligned materials to support instruction for EL students. Like EL students, teachers are not a monolithic group; they vary in terms of their preparation and experience, percentages of EL students in their classrooms, and subjects they teach. Thus, they also differ in the ways they utilize their materials, the value they place on characteristics of these materials, and their preferences for receiving and using guidance. Understanding these differences is critical for developing instructional materials and providing learning opportunities that effectively increase teachers' capacity to meet EL students' needs and provide culturally relevant instruction.

The survey results suggest that better instructional materials with embedded supports for EL students (e.g., scaffolded, grade-aligned content; guidance on how to integrate content learning goals with language learning goals) are sorely needed in California. EL students need rigorous content made culturally responsive by way of materials that are asset-based, that create a sense of belonging, that affirm cultural authenticity, and that recognize nuanced identities (Armstrong, 2021). Such materials make learning accessible to a variety of students, promoting equity in terms of both content and differentiated supports for EL students who are at different points in their language learning and language proficiency.

Providing such materials, however, is insufficient without accompanying professional learning. The survey revealed differences between ELA teachers and science and math teachers in their perceptions of the suitability of their instructional materials for EL students—differences that may be related to the content of teachers' professional learning. Compared to their science and math colleagues, California's ELA teachers reported having had more professional learning opportunities related to modifying materials. They more frequently modified materials to be more culturally responsive in general and more appropriate for EL students (Burr et al., 2020). Researchers have demonstrated that there is a general lack of professional learning models for the design and implementation of instruction that integrates science and language learning for secondary science teachers (Meskill & Oliveira, 2019).

Differences in teacher perceptions across subject areas may also be related to differences in California's subject-matter frameworks. All grade-level chapters in the state's ELA/ELD framework use examples to model the use of scaffolding for EL students and to illustrate what culturally relevant pedagogy looks like. Such examples are not included in the state's current math and science frameworks. That disparity, however, is being addressed: the 2021 draft math framework includes instructional vignettes, grounded in the framework's organizing concepts, to improve math teaching and learning for EL students (CDE, 2021a). Going forward, use of these vignettes in local professional learning activities would help math teachers see how to implement the strategies and apply them directly to their classroom lessons (Burr et al., 2021).

Research has shown that professional learning needs to be nuanced and contextualized, given variations in localized needs and capacity (Burr et al., 2021). This brief highlights the need for attention to the significant numbers of EL students in few-EL counties in the northern and central areas of California (Table 1 and Figure 1). Additionally, the survey findings show that, across all subjects, few-EL teachers tend to place low importance on materials that include supports for EL students when planning their lessons. These teachers could benefit from professional learning about the importance of such materials, but the authors of this brief could not identify any existing professional learning opportunities specifically for teachers with low shares of EL students in their classrooms.

In particular, math and science teachers—who may lack expertise in integrating language and literacy with content learning—need professional learning to better understand how to use their materials to meet the

needs of EL students and to help them provide culturally relevant instruction. The survey also indicates, however, that even ELA teachers with lower concentrations of EL students also need additional guidance.

Besides offering tailored professional learning, schools and districts can support high-quality EL instruction by providing teachers with common planning time, supported and guided by an instructional coach or a knowledgeable facilitator, wherein cross-disciplinary groups of teachers share knowledge and best practices around content-area language and literacy instruction (Baker et al., 2014). For example, ELA teachers with experience teaching language and literacy could share their expertise with less experienced district math and science teachers, who then could share their learnings with grade-level colleagues and through schoolwide efforts.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, education challenges today are more acute than ever. EL students have been severely impacted by unequal access to quality content and resources. Education leaders can take advantage of timely opportunities to accelerate learning for these students: the upcoming revisions of California's subject-matter frameworks and related materials lists, and recent investments to improve California's professional learning systems. For example, when redesigning professional learning in math to support the implementation of the revised framework, leaders should include strategies and practices that better meet the needs of teachers and EL students. Schools and districts can consider using the framework in professional learning *prior* to the adoption of new materials, so that teachers are primed for the new expectations in these materials.

By listening to teacher voices and taking advantage of statewide policy opportunities, education leaders can develop new instructional materials with aligned professional learning and teacher supports. All of these actions are key levers for ensuring that EL students have equitable access to high-level learning.

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Suggested citation: Burr, E., & Lewis, R. W. (2022). *What California teachers say about their instructional materials for English learner students: New data and insights*. WestEd.



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This brief is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.